

Op-Ed Minimum wages were first designed to keep women and minorities out of jobs



California Governor Jerry Brown signs a minimum wage bill at the Ronald Reagan State Building in Los Angeles on April 4. The bill will raise the statewide minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2022. (Los Angeles Times)

By **Thomas C. Leonard**

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When California legislators voted to raise the statewide minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2022, labor activists cheered. Discounting fears that a \$15 minimum might cost some low-wage workers their jobs, activists and their political allies celebrated a victory for fairness and economic justice.

Progressive labor activists took a very different view 100 years ago, when 15 states established America's first minimum wages. Labor reformers then believed that a legal minimum would hand a raise to deserving white Anglo-Saxon men, and a pink slip to their undeserving competitors: “racially undesirable” immigrants, the mentally and physically disabled, and women. The original progressives hailed minimum-wage-caused job losses among these groups as a positive benefit to the U.S. economy and to Anglo-Saxon racial integrity.

In 1910, 22% of the U.S. workforce was foreign-born. A Who's Who of American economic reform warned that immigration was leading to “race suicide,” what President Theodore Roosevelt in 1907 called the “greatest

problem of civilization.” This race suicide theory claimed that because non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants had low living standards, their competition in the labor market undercut the wages of the American workingman. The key assumption was that Anglo-Saxon natives were more productive, but that immigrants worked cheap. As Stanford sociologist and avowed nativist Edward A. Ross put it, “the coolie, though he cannot outdo the American, can underlive him.” Woodrow Wilson, echoing many others, said that Chinese immigrants could “live upon a handful of rice for a pittance.” Similar charges were made against Jews and Catholics arriving from southern and eastern Europe.

The American-born worker, who refused to lower his family's living standard to the immigrant's level, opted instead to have fewer children. Thus, concluded the theory, the inferior races would outbreed and displace their white Anglo-Saxon betters.

Progressive economists proposed a minimum wage as the ideal remedy. It lifted up the deserving while excluding the unworthy and did both in the name of progress. Journalist and progressive social reformer Paul Kellogg in 1913 advocated a minimum wage of \$3 per day for all immigrants, double the \$1.50 per day ordinary laborers were then paid. Kellogg knew that no firm would hire an unskilled immigrant for \$3 per day. That was the purpose of his high minimum wage, as he wrote, to exclude “Angelo Lucca and Alexis Spivak” from American shores, thus protecting American jobs for “John Smith and Michael Murphy and Carl Sneider.”

Kellogg targeted “racially undesirable” immigrants, but a high minimum wage would also protect the American workingman from unworthy economic competition already in the American workforce. The developmentally disabled, then called “feeble minded” or “defective,” also were treated by many labor reformers as low-wage threats. Unable to command a minimum wage, they too would be pushed into unemployment and then could be removed to institutions or to labor colonies.

According to British reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb, when a minimum wage cost a disabled person his job, this was “not a mark of social disease, but actually of social health.”

In the case of women, the minimum wage argument was subtler than the eugenic hysteria directed at immigrants and the disabled. Rather, it was couched in the paternalism of protecting women's health and virtue. In reality, labor reformers wanted to protect employment from women as much as they wanted to protect women from employment. Women made up 21% of the U.S. workforce in 1910 and reformers like Florence Kelley, who led the campaign for minimum wages, accused them of undercutting male breadwinners entitled to a “family wage.”

Labor reformers have far more inclusive views these days. Unlike their namesakes, 21st century progressives consider job losses a social cost, not a putative social benefit. Much of the economic debate about raising the minimum wage in California and New York has in fact centered on how best to avoid causing unemployment.

Today's progressives would say their namesakes were wrong on race and gender — and wrong on the effects of the minimum wage on employment. We know better today, they say.

The original progressives were indeed wrong — reprehensibly so — on race and gender (even if the 2016 presidential campaign demonstrates that part of the electorate thinks otherwise). But were they wrong that a minimum wage set high enough will cost low-wage workers their jobs? If they were right, and a \$15 per hour minimum by 2022 proves to be too high too fast, the workers who will lose their jobs will disproportionately be people of color, immigrants, the disabled and women — the very people labor reformers vilified as low wage threats a century ago.

Thomas C. Leonard teaches economics and history at Princeton. He is the author of “Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era.”

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